

Solace of Death

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Summary: Refugees from the Covenant onslaught attempted to get away through slip-space. Now, not knowing where they are and surrounded by strange storms that enclose an unknown solar system, they make a new home. But what will happen when the storms disappear?

1. Chapter 1

Prologue

IT WAS FUNNY. Oskar had always found the way that others reacted under different circumstances amusing, or at least as amusing as a scribe-servitor could do so.

Oskar was in a room full of high ranking officials of the Imperium. Men and women from the Administratum, Ecclesiarchy, Adeptus Mechanicus and, perhaps most importantly, an Imperial general and an Inquisitor of the Ordos Xenos, both seated at the center of the review board. The Explorator fleet captain they were questioning was the source of Oskar's amusement.

"Now, tell us the facts captain. The truth. What caused your fleet, however small it may be, to discontinue further explorations of the Pelanor system, right here in the beautiful Ultima Segmentum?" the sarcasm in the Inquisitor's voice was heavier than the ornate armor he wore, and Jeramiah Fullhorn, captain of the *_Canis Imperialis_*, shifted his weight uneasily at the sound of the man's tone.

"Wellâ€¦erm," the captain looked nervously at the others seated before him. "After the warp storms that have been plaguing that, er, region for almost four hundred years now ended, we began to move into the system in order to investigate-"

The Imperial general, Hower, slammed his fist into the table.

"We asked for what caused the delay not the entire mission's

operational record! Be specific! Why weren't the system's planetary bodies surveyed fully?"

Again the captain shifted uneasily, to the delight of Oskar, who found the exchange hilarious. He worked furiously to expunge that from his notes as he realized he shouldn't have written it down.

Jeramiah began again.

"As I was just about to say, sirs, we entered the system and were setting up our fleet's scanners when my own ship picked up radar signals moving between LRP-23 and its moon," he stood straighter, growing in confidence. "Simply put, LRP-23 and several of the other planets in system were already inhabited."

The Inquisitor sat straighter in his chair and leaned forward slightly.

"Inhabited by what, precisely?" he asked.

"Well, my lord, they weren't xenos, however they certainly weren't Imperial either."

Now Hower was getting interested.

"Did you attempt communications?"

"No sir. That wasn't within our operational parameters, and I personally deemed it was not the best course of action. We were still concealed from their scanners, or at least we believed we were at that point and instead I ordered my men to send out a small spy drone in order to gain a better understanding of them."

This time a female clerk spoke up. "How technologically advanced were they? You mentioned they were travelling between planets."

"For a newly discovered population they were very advanced. From what we observed they had stable and efficient starships and they were capable of warp jumps which gave off some odd radiological readings. Butâ€¦" Jeramiah trailed off, as though lost about what to say.

"What is it? Spit it out, man!" Hower was practically fuming under his thick coat.

"Uh, well, to tell the truth, I don't think they were indigenous to the Pelanor system."

The board members looked and murmured to each other in shock and confusion at this statement. The thought of a new, already inhabited human system was fantastic news. If the inhabitants already followed or could be converted to the Imperial cult then the Imperium gained a whole new solar system to control, and if not they could take the planets by force and add to the local slave numbers. But an interstellar empire was too much of a potential threat.

"And what makes you think that, captain?" the Inquisitor asked, cutting through the chatter around him.

"Well sir, although they appeared to be quite advanced, the population was nowhere near what one would expect. Apart from some relatively small mining colonies and outposts, the only major population center was a city on LRP-23."

"How many are there estimated to be living on LRP-23?" That same female clerk again. Oskar couldn't remember her name.

No.

She hadn't identified herself as she came in.

Oskar was about to ask her what it was when his sensors registered a sharp pain in his skull. He stopped, and couldn't remember what he had been about to do, so he simply continued to write.

"Ma'am, the initial estimates put their strength at around fifty million on LRP-23 alone with a further twenty to thirty million living in outposts and mining settlements."

* * *

><p>Jeramiah Fullhorn walked through the waiting lobby of the spaceport towards his private shuttle. His aid Ark Fisk walked beside him.<p>

"Ark," he said. "Remind me the next time we have to go through that to shoot myself beforehand."

"Oh, come on Miah," she replied. "It wasn't that bad."

"Really? Were you actually in the room?"

Jeramiah turned to look at her. She had been his friend longer than anyone else would have tolerated him and he had always thought she was the most beautiful woman he had ever known. She was only twenty seven standard years old to his forty three, and had joined his crew at sixteen. While all of his other crew had served him for longer, his relationship with them was entirely professional. Ark was different. She was beautiful, witty and cunning. She wasn't his lover, but she was a friend. That until recently was all he had ever wanted.

"I was. And I'd say it was pretty brutal in there."

Jeramiah and Ark were startled by the voice close behind them. They turned to see the Inquisitor from beforehand, flanked oddly closely by the female clerk and General Hower standing further away and looking as furious as ever.

"Jeramiah Fullhorn, born on Talassar, aged forty three, current captain of the Canis Imperialis. Am I correct?" the Inquisitor asked.

"Yes sir," Jeramiah was in awe of the man before him. He hadn't realized how tall he was earlier and his heavy, silver armor made him even more imposing.

"I am Inquisitor Petro Macador of the Ordos Xenos," he placed his hand on the shoulder of the young clerk. "This is my aid, Breska

Kalken, and I believe you've already met General Hower."

"A pleasure to meet you, sir," Jeramiah said this even though he wasn't sure if he meant it.

"The pleasure is all mine I'm sure," the Macador replied. "Now, captain, how would you like to become very rich?"

That was it. He had decided. Jeramiah was going to hate this man.

"What, would you have me do, my lord?"

"Well," a sickening smile split the Inquisitor's face. "As it happens, I, and a few, oh, hundred thousand men or so need to be going somewhere. And, I hear, you have a few spare ships around."

2. Chapter 2

Chapter 1

Tim stood on the edge of the former transport's observation deck. The city beyond the glass would be considered ugly by some, but to him, and the other men and women who called it home, it was stunning.

Seven years, Tim thought. _Seven years and we've come so far_.

* * *

><p>Seven years ago, Tim, two other Spartan-IIIs and their handler had been on a recruitment mission for the Spartan program on Zhou IV when the Covenant discovered the densely populated world. Although the planet was evacuated, only fifty eight million of its inhabitants made it off world. When the Covenant started to move in the fleet abandoned the world to focus on saving the refugees.<p>

More than seventy million people were burned and murdered on the surface Zhou IV, and the ONI command center, which just happened to be evacuated before anyone else, still declared it a success.

But the colonist's hardship hadn't ended there. Just two days into their randomized Slip-space jump, a specialist on board one of the orbital defense platforms being towed from their former home picked up odd readings in the ambient radiation of slip-space. Crew members and passengers on other ships started noticing blue patches in the otherwise white nothingness. After a matter of hours the fleet was surrounded by it.

Admiral Seer decided to drop back into real-space to see where they were and plot a course for one of the other colonies.

What they found was something they never would have suspected.

The entire fleet found themselves in a solar system that had never been surveyed. One that was surrounded in strange storms that made people feel uneasy when they looked at them too closely.

The only expedition to try to go through those storms never returned.

Over the course of several months, the fleet started relocating to the fourth planet in the system. At first some didn't want to go, but they soon realized it was better than living in a floating metal box for the remainder of their stay.

As the civilian ships lost passengers and crew, it was decided to use some of the older cargo, transport and manufacturing ships as warehouses, homes and factories.

And seven years later the city, its people and the outposts on other worlds were flourishing.

So they named the planet, Hope.

* * *

><p>"Hey, boss!"<p>

The sudden exclamation broke Tim's train of thought as the air next to him materialized into a fully armoured Spartan. He couldn't see it, but Tim knew she had a grin on her face.

"Jodi," he said. "Could you stop doing that?"

"I could, but then things would be pretty boring for you wouldn't they." She removed her recon helmet. That grin of hers was inescapable. "I love the suit by the way," she said, and struck a mock pose.

Tim smiled and looked back out over the city once more. It had taken him ages to beg his way into getting the ONI higher-ups to start production of MJOLNIR armour, and even then production had been limited. The only reason they started was because the only AI who had designs and schematics for MJOLNIR was a smart AI who called herself Billy. She was the also the successor to the Spartans previous handler.

"So, what's been happening this morning?" Tim asked.

"Nothing much," Jodi replied. "Oh, wait. There was a small greeny problem near one of the mining facilities in sector eighteen. They said they spotted a couple of them running around and that it might get serious in a couple of hours. Command wants us to help."

"Okay. Send Mike and his squad in to support them."

"Mike? He's a bit green himself, sir."

"True," Tim thought for a moment. "Alright, send Linton to back up Mike's squad."

"Just Linton?" Jodi's grin was larger than ever.

* * *

><p>The transport warthog drove in a small convoy along with three others down a dirt highway towards the mining station, otherwise

known as "Hell" by its occupants. Not only was the facility in the middle of nowhere, it was frequented by what many had come to call "greenies".<p>

From what some had heard them scream in near incomprehensible ways, they referred to themselves as orks. Most people just called them greenies because it suited them, and it pissed them off to hilarious affect.

As far as Mike was concerned, he just wanted them to die.

Mike's sat in the passenger seat of the transport. In the driver's seat next to him was Daniel, his pilot and general wheelman. In the back of the hog there were three others, Connor, their demo man, Adel, scout and recon, and finally there was Isabel, their heavy weapons specialist.

Mike, Connor and Daniel had all been Zhou natives, while Adel had been a refugee from Trent. No one knew where Isabel was from.

"X-ray one; this is the major, over."

Mike acknowledged with a double com-click. He had never seen or spoken to Linton much. He mostly kept to himself, even amongst the other Spartans, and almost never helped the colonel or the lieutenant with training.

"We're coming up on the compound. Get your team ready." The link broke abruptly.

Mike opened another link to his squad. "Okay guys, you heard the major, load up."

As X-ray checked their weapons the mining compound grew in front of them. The Building itself was tall and flat roofed, with only a few observation towers overlooking the roadway and a larger one monitoring the open cut mine adjacent to the compound. The site was made five years prior and new sections were still under construction. It was ugly too. Pipes and girders burst from walls and what looked like reinforced scaffolding held the structure up.

X-ray and two squads of army troopers disembarked from their warthogs and were greeted by a security officer. The man was clearly nervous, sweat forming on his dark brow.

A trooper sergeant approached the man. "What's the situation?" he asked.

"In a word," the man replied. "Bad. Sentry spotted a few of those green bastards shouting and running around like they usually do. We sent a patrol around the edges of the complex and found holes and crude cutting tools near the walls. They might be feral, but they aren't as stupid as you'd think. None got through though."

"What about the mine itself?" the major suddenly asked. "Is there any way they could have gotten in there?"

Slightly taken aback by the giant now speaking to him, the security officer simply looked at him for a moment.

"There is one mine shaft that leads further away from the main hole than the others. It goes right outside the complex, over a kilometre," the man thought for a moment. "I don't think they could get in there sir, it's five hundred metres down just at the entrance."

"What's your name?"

"Um, Andrew Wilkins, sir," the officer said.

"Andrew, show me to that mine shaft. The troopers will stay behind and help secure the upper levels."

"Yes sir."

* * *

><p>Andrew looked even more nervous than before. "This is it."<p>

The entrance to the shaft was at the bottom of the main pit. This part of the mine had been cordoned off for being too unstable. The entrance was boarded up and looked like the maw of some great monster.

"Are there cameras inside? Is there a way you could communicate with us from the main tower?" the major asked.

"Sure. There are old cameras and reception boosters for radios along the way, but no one's been down here since we reached this deep."

"Go to the tower, keep in contact with us as long as you can," the major slung his sniper rifle and turned to X-ray as Andrew made his way back to the truck that had carried them down. "Mike, it's your team, and I'm just here as backup. You're in command for now."

Finally, Mike thought.

"Adel, your point, Isabel your up second. Daniel, the major and me in are in the middle and Connor, your rear guard," Mike was excited. For the first time he'd be leading his team on a real mission. "Move out, X-ray."

As they moved down the shaft, the team began to realize how unstable the walls around them could be. Parts of the ceiling had fallen in and they came across old checkpoints and loaders that had been crushed under tons of dirt and rock.

They started to hear it about two kilometres down. Grinding, chipping and scratching noises in the tunnel up ahead.

Mike tried to open a link to the main tower. "Andrew, this is X-ray one. Can you hear me, over?"

"Yeah, X-ray, but the signal's pretty weak."

"Andrew, do you have any equipment or miners in the shafts closest to this one?"

"No sir," Andrew said. "The mine has been in lockdown ever since the first sighting."

"Tell the troopers that we might have some greenies down here and that they should be prepared for an attack from both above and below. Out."

The team started moving again. The sounds of digging grew steadily around them for two minutes. Then three. Then four. They weren't just hearing hand tools, now they began hearing mechanical drills and crude engines.

Just as they reached a bend in the tunnel, the noises stopped. X-ray checked their motion trackers. Nothing. The walls were impenetrable to X-ray's scanners.

"What happened?" Daniel asked. "Why the hell did they stop?"

"Maybe the drill broke," Connor suggested humorously. "It's not like we've seen them using one before."

That's true, Mike thought. _We haven't_.

"Quiet." Adel broke the conversation in two. Mike could tell by his voice that he was concentrating.

They saw a light coming up the tunnel.

"Cover!"

X-ray swiftly moved into cover before the first ork came around the bend.

The creature was huge, even by a Spartan's standards. Nearly eight feet tall, it was a mass of muscle and sinew. It carried a flaming torch in one hand and in the other it held a large club. Behind it were six other, smaller orks.

Standing at about six foot each, they held torches, picks, shovels and an assortment of other tools. Some scratch built, others stolen. They were also followed by one creature smaller still. It seemed to be carrying the other's equipment by itself. There were too many to take them by stealth.

Mike needed no more information.

"On three I want Isabel to lay suppression fire on that big bastard while the rest of us fire in bursts at the smaller ones. Remember to aim for the head." Five acknowledgement lights winked back at him.

The major's light, Mike noticed, had come on later than the others.

"One."

"Two."

"Three!"

As he finished the countdown, Isabel's heavy machine gun roared into life, tearing down one ork with its 12.7mm rounds. The large ork, smart enough to realise charging wasn't the best idea, moved behind a loader. It shouted an order and several of its counterparts did the same, while two others ran forwards.

With a loud scream, the two orks charged towards the team's position waving their makeshift tools above their heads.

Daniel was the first to start firing, his assault rifle's rounds ripping into one ork's chest and face. Mike came up next, shooting the second ork in the eyes with his DMR.

The other orks started screaming a battle cry and charged from their positions with surprising speed.

Mike's team dropped two more of them, while a third continued onwards, only to be cut down by Isabel.

That however, was a critical mistake.

No longer under fire from the heavy machine gun, the large ork walked out of cover grinning. It was now holding a crude box-like gun in its meaty hands.

High calibre rounds ricocheted off the walls around the Spartans as the ork sprayed their position with bullets. Laughing as it fired the beast walked slowly towards them.

Until its gun blew into pieces.

Mike turned to see the major standing in the centre of the tunnel, his sniper rifle to his shoulder.

He fired again, this time hitting the ork's arm.

Angered by the sudden loss of its weapon, the ork charged towards the major.

To Mike's surprise the major counter charged.

At eight feet tall the ork was taller than the major by nine inches and the major's GUNGNIR helmet restricted his vision.

Neither seemed to bother him.

The ork swung his club at Linton's head. The major ducked under the blow and rolled to his right. It struck at him again with its left fist. The major stepped out of the way then ran forwards as the swing passed him. Still in the motion of its last swing, the ork could do nothing as the major reached over its arm and wrapped his own arm around the ork's neck.

Kicking the ork in the back of its leg to bring it lower, the major drew his M6D sidearm and aimed at the back of its head.

The last thing the ork saw was Linton's armoured faceplate as the magnum's explosive round blew out the contents of its brain cavity.

The major let the body slump to the floor.

"Report, everyone alright?" Mike asked.

Five acknowledgement lights winked back at him.

"The little one's gone," Isabel said. "We should find him before he warns any more of them."

* * *

><p>They continue on around the bend. After only traveling fifty more metres they came to the entrance of a larger cavern.<p>

It was filled with orks.

They stretched from wall to wall, going all the way round the chamber and up several levels of walkways along the walls themselves. At the middle of the giant mob there was a single ork. It was undoubtedly the largest ork any of X-ray team had ever seen.

Standing ten feet tall, its mountain of a body was covered in metal plates and leather. The giant was armed with a mechanical claw where its left arm should have been, and in its right hand it held a double barrelled machine gun similar to the one they had seen before.

They had all clearly heard the gunfire.

"Humies!" the huge creature bellowed with surprising fluency. "You fink you canz jus' walk in 'ere an' start shootin' my boyz? An' den you fink you canz jus' walk back out?" the huge ork burst into laughter, followed quickly by his subordinates.

"I'm Boss BoneKrakka! An' yous gonna die!"

"And I'm terribly sorry Boss BoneKrakka," Connor said, stepping to the front of the team. He was holding a demolition charge. "But that isn't going to happen."

Connor threw the charge. It flew through the air over the head of BoneKrakka and embedded itself in the ceiling three stories up.

Realising their intent, BoneKrakka stampeded through his horde towards the Spartans.

A few seconds later the charge exploded. Several orks on the higher walkways were killed in the blast, but the explosion's after effects caused the most damage.

Hundreds of orks and their smaller cousins were crushed under rock and dirt while others became trapped. Dozens more attempted to flee through the exit. An exit the Spartans currently occupied.

"Time to go!" Mike urged over their coms. The Spartans started running back the way they had come, followed by more orks than they had time to count, led by an enraged BoneKrakka.

The charge had done more damage than Connor had intended. At least

that was what Mike assumed. Connor did go overboard sometimes.

The walls and ceiling of the tunnel collapsed behind them burying more and more of the green monsters.

They charged on.

They were nearing the exit. The ork Boss and a group of orks not far behind. Wild shots flew past them.

As they neared the opening Connor readied another charge.

"What the hell are you doing?" Daniel cried.

"Just tucking in the kids!"

X-ray team dived through the entrance. Connor, the last one out, threw the charge at the roof of the entrance as he dived. Mere milliseconds later it detonated, crushing the orks behind them.

In the clouds of dust none of them could see.

"Connor?" Isabel asked. "Where are you?"

As the dust cleared they saw Connor sitting himself up with a grunt.

"That went well," he said. "They're not too bad fighters. You now for a pile of fungus and all."

"Are you okay?" Mike asked.

"If I wasn't I wouldn't have said it went well, would I?"

They turned at a sudden noise from the rubble behind them.

BoneKrakka's huge claw burst from the debris followed by his head and shoulders. The battered ork shouted his people's war cry.

"Stupid Humies!" he bellowed, louder than ever before. "You fink I was dead? I'll tear you ap-"

BoneKrakka was cut short by an armoured boot he now found breaking several of his teeth.

The major pressed the barrel of his sniper firmly between the Bosses eyes.

"No," he said simply. "You won't."

The armour piercing, anti-materiel round tore through BoneKrakka's skull.

3. Chapter 3

****Chapter 2****

++TRANSCRIPT of Vox Signal

Signal received: 0200hrs

Source: 32nd Mercian Light Armoured Regiment

Received by: _Celestial Saint_ [Frigate]

Signal begins: + [Unit Commander]â€|I repeat! We are under attack by unknown forces! God Emperor! They're tearing into us! Requesting additional forces! (To unknown trooper) Close that hatch! [Vox officer aboard _Celestial Saint_] Commander what's going on? Can you identify your attackers at all? [Unit Commander] Negative! Wait (pause) xenos? That doesn't make sense. We weren't told about any xenos on this rock! [Unknown Guardsman] Sir, they're almost on us! [Unit Commander] Seal the doors. Weld them shut if you have to! _Celestial_, we needâ€|down here now! A Vulture, anything! Please! [Guardsman] Throne! Sir, they're cutting through! (Small explosion. Screams [presumably Unknown Guardsman]) [Unit Commander] Throne. Die you xenos scum! (Las weapon discharge) (Unidentified hiss, followed by firing of projectile weapon) [Unit Commander] You think that pink crap even hurts (pained grunt)? (More projectiles firing (Approximately six)) (Muffled scream, followed by loud explosion and static)

Signal terminates +

Last known location of 32nd Mercian Light Armoured Regiment investigated.

No traces of wounded or deceased enemy combatants found. ++

* * *

><p>Jeramiah leaned back in his chair, not sure of what to say. He sat in his personal quarters aboard the Canis Imperialis. Inquisitor Macador sat on a chair opposite his own, wearing a heavy, brown coat over his armour.

"What, exactly, did I just read?" he finally said.

"Something interesting, Captain. Something very interesting," Macador replied. "When my men and I reached the Mercian's location we found only two things left of them, dead men and burnt chimeras. Of their attackers there was almost no trace. What we did find was sketchy."

The Inquisitor handed Jeramiah three picts. One was of a man; his entrails spilled on the ground around him and deep, scorched gashes on his chest, arms and face. The second was of the wreck of a salamander scout tank, half melted along with the ground around it. The last showed the remains of the Mercian commander. Jeramiah almost retched at the sight.

"From what we can tell, they used mainly heat and plasma based weapons," Macador continued. "They attacked the guardsmen unawares and utterly crushed them. Then they simply disappeared. The _Celestial Saint_ picked up an unidentified jump signature leaving the system shortly afterward. Unidentified, that is, until recently."

The Inquisitor produced two charts. One showed the radiation given off by the suspected xenos vessel, and the other showed the same information for the jumps the _Canis_ had detected at LRP-23.

They were identical.

* * *

><p>ON LEVEL 10-C of the Canis, Ark Fisk, Hektor Pranovic and an assortment of other crew members sat around a portable heater. They had been discussing various shipboard issues, from the taste of the water to the apparent lack of proper heating, when someone struck up conversation concerning their Inquisitorial "friend's" armour.

"I think it's some sort of special power armour or something," said one crewman.

"Thanks dumb-ass," another jabbed back. "I think we'd established that. What I want to know is what it's made of, 'cause to me it looks like silver."

Another man, sitting across from the last, spoke. "Haven't ya seen it up close, Mono? It shimmers and moves under the light like a pearl."

"I want to know who made it. It sure isn't Imperial."

"Maybe it's Eldar?"

"Since when have Eldar given anyone anything?" Hektor said, followed by a course of rapturous laughter.

As Hektor spoke, Ark noticed that his breath was fogging. Everyone's breath was. Some of the other crew began to shiver as the heater suddenly failed, sheets of frost forming on the walls and pipes around them.

Breska Kalken moved out of the shadows of several cargo crates, and Ark began to suspect the sudden cold wasn't because of the heating problem.

"You Want to know where Master got his armour from?" she began, the way the words rolled from her mouth was odd, as though they were just out of time with her lips. "Then first let me ask you this. Do you know anything of the Gortar people?"

"I've heard rumors," Ark replied. "They live in the next sector to the north."

"Lived." The girl said.

She disappeared from their sight for a moment as the lights flickered once again. The others were looking at Ark now; some were backing away, blindly knocking over chairs and stools.

No, she thought. _They're looking-_.

Ark froze as Breska's hand began to caress her tanned cheek. She managed to turn her head to see the girl's eyes looking right back into her own. They looked vacant, as though she was hollow

inside.

"You see, Master was the first human to contact the Gortar in history. They were a peaceful people, so long as you didn't insult them," she began to smile, but like the frost it had no warmth. "Soon after Master arrived however, the system was invaded by a small tyranid splinter fleet. My Master offered the Gortar people help and they wisely accepted. However, they limited what he was allowed to do and when the tyranids attacked, the Gortar ships were soon being overwhelmed. So Master ordered his fleet to move in and aid them."

The girl began moving her hand through Ark's long, spiked hair, the way a child might comb the hair of a doll. Ark still couldn't move.

"An interesting fact about the Gortar is that they were shape shifters, but in a sense that they can change the shape of others not themselves. When Master was invited to their ruler's palace they rewarded his actions with the armour he now wears which they made out of the strongest metals they had. But, because he had gone against their request to not become involved with the main engagement, they then requested that he leave. And to the surprise of his men, he accepted."

The room continued to grow colder, every word the girl spoke the temperature dropped.

She continued. "Then as Master's transport left their world," the lieutenant saw a brief flicker of flame in the girl's eyes. "He ordered his fleet to perform Exterminatus, virus bombing and then burning the entire planet and its moons."

The lights failed suddenly before reactivating. The crewmen present looked around the compartment, but none could see Breska.

Ark was the only one to see her as she left.

Breska Kalken stood at the opposite end of the room, still staring into the lieutenant's eyes, that same cold smile upon her face.

As she slid out of sight, Ark saw that spark of flame in the girl's stare.

Her eyes widened at the sudden realization.

The girl wasn't just a psyker.

She wasn't even human.

* * *

><p>JERAMIAH STOOD on the command deck of the Canis's bridge. At his side, Lieutenant Ark Fisk was still visibly shaken by her experience with the girl. And from what she had told Jeramiah, she had right to be.

"Twenty seconds until real-space transition." sounded one of the servitors below, its raspy statement making several bridge officers shout orders of their own.

The Inquisitor stood directly below him, staring into the hololithic display at the centre of the bridge. He too was flanked by his aid and General Hower, along with four Space Marines of the Deathwatch.

"Ten seconds." The servitor chimed.

Jeramiah squeezed the handrail till his knuckles turned white. "All hands," he said over the fleet wide intercom. "Brace for transition."

* * *

><p>Sitting at his station aboard the deep-space scanning facility above the surface of Remnant, the closest planet to Hope, a young ensign spotted a peculiar anomaly on his radar screen. A few seconds later and his station's alarms began to scream about proximity and radiological alarms.<p>

The Imperial fleet had arrived.

* * *

><p>Admiral Seer marched quickly down the access way to the city's High-Com facility. As he walked, several other high ranking officers, including the head of the ONI command centre and his junior staff attempted to keep pace.<p>

"Why wasn't I informed about this the moment you got it?" he asked the ONI chief.

"Sir, we only received the information ten minutes ago."

"Then why wasn't I told ten minutes ago?" he raged. "And that was a rhetorical question, Harry. I don't want you spouting your ONI protocol bullshit at me."

The party continued onwards through checkpoints and security scanners until they reached the command centre. The room was awash with personnel, all trying to establish the situation.

As Seer stepped up to the main screen, a holographic projector sprang into life beside him. On it stood a small rendition of a woman wearing a striped, purple suit, with a cane held in one hand. Her name was Billy; she was the main Spartan handler. Her top hat was held in her other hand. Things were serious.

She was then joined by Heartless, a disembodied head and the highest ranked ONI AI on Hope, and Gaia, the AI in charge of High-Com's facilities and resources.

"What's happening, Gaia?" the Admiral asked, without turning his gaze from the main screen.

"Sir, as you know, the rift storms surrounding the system have been clearing rapidly over the past few days. Twelve minutes ago we received word from scanning station Beta-4-10 above Remnant saying that for a short time, another series of smaller rifts opened close to Remnant's moon," she paused as charts and images of the rifts

appeared on the screen. "Before you arrived, it was confirmed that a fleet of ships of an unknown origin used the rifts to enter the system. They are currently holding position six hundred thousand kilometres away from Hope."

"Did they attempt to contact us? Is it the Covenant?"

Gaia hesitated for a moment. "Yes sir, they sent a transmission to station Beta-5-10 and the station relayed it to us. And I can safely say they aren't the Covenant."

"Play it."

There was another slight pause as the transmission was recovered and the screen changed to show the speaker's voice pattern.

"This is the Canis Imperialis, flagship of Exploration Fleet Zeta-Prime-235/2-2, humble servants of the mighty Imperium and the God-Emperor of Mankind. By His will, we seek that which rightfully belongs to the Imperium.

We ask for a meeting with your people's most senior members, so that we might further Humanity and Man's Empire peacefully, and spread the good will of the blessed God-Emperor.

However, if you do not comply with this request, if you resist our fleet's and the Imperium's authority and our right to rule over the galaxy, we will have no choice but to treat this as an act of war and reply in kind."

The screen changed again to show one of the Imperial ships, its armoured hull was pitted and scored with damage. As the clip continued to roll, the ship began to break off from the fleet, training a long-barreled weapon on one of two asteroids moving in between them and Hope. The cannon discharged, sending a lance of energy toward the closest asteroid, blowing it into a cloud of debris.

The room had gone completely silent. Admiral Seer balled his fists in anger.

"Gaia, send them a message of our own. Text only. Message beginsâ€¦"

* * *

><p>INQUISITOR MACADOR stood at the hololith, reading the response from LRP-23. He was amused and slightly puzzled by it.<p>

Puzzlingly, they had referred to themselves as the United Nations Space Command, or UNSC, and stated that they would accept the request of a meeting. All that was perfectly fine, by anyone's standards. But the last line in the message was what Macador found amusing.

It was a simple statement that the Imperial fleet was not to intimidate or threaten their people again.

Macador was almost at the point of laughing at the idea of these uneducated primitives ordering six Imperial vessels to do something,

when an alarm started blaring at the main scanning console.

Macador saw Fullhorn shuffle along the guide rail of his command deck, shouting orders to silence the alarm. "What's happening?" he heard the captain ask.

"There's a large energy build up in one of their orbital platforms. It's definitely some sort of weapon, sir." The young ensign looked worried, sweat beading on his forehead

"Damn it. Order the fleet to set their shields to maximum power and to move into attack-"

The Inquisitor held up his hand. "Belay that order, Captain."

"But, my lord-"

"I said belay it," Macador said calmly. "I think they are going to give us a show." He motioned towards the remaining asteroid. Larger than the first, it was about to pass by them. Which meant the fleet would be out of the weapon's firing line as it tracked the immense, floating rock.

"My lord, forgive me for being outspoken, but the asteroid is four hundred thousand kilometres distant from the planet. I don't think they could hit a target at such a range."

As though on cue, the platform fired its main weapon.

A three thousand ton slug of metal launched from the platform, reaching its target four hundred thousand kilometres away in no more than three seconds. The much larger asteroid wasn't just blown into pieces of rock, it was almost completely atomized.

Still peering at the hololith, Macador's smile grew just a little more.

Interesting, he thought. _Very interesting_.

4. Chapter 4

****Chapter 3****

THEY HAD chased him down the streets of the old town and he had run as fast as he could.

He should have guessed something was amiss as he neared a large square at the town centre. The bird-freaks began to slow and didn't follow him in, as though waiting for something else. Something else to finish him.

And when 'Something Else' came, he didn't scream or try to flee.

At first.

* * *

><p>On-board the orbital station, Mike and his squad stood at attention to one side of the airlock doors. Each was fully armoured

save for their helmets, linked onto their belts. They held their own weapons except for Isabel, who had to make do with an assault rifle.<p>

The Major was there too, standing furthest from the doors. He had had to trade his sniper rifle, but instead opted for a shotgun like Connor. He still wore his helmet.

As Mike looked on, Colonel Tim and Lieutenant Jodi stood ready to meet the Imperial party. The Spartans would escort them down to the surface in the near complete space elevator and meet with the Admiral and Commander Harry Abbnet, the ONI chief.

There was a slight shudder beneath Mike's feet as the Imperial craft landed in the bay on the other side of the doors. He was nervous, but excited at the same time. They hadn't met anyone from the other side of the storms in almost a decade.

Of course Mike and the others were also being cautious. The so called Imperial Explorator fleet had threatened Hope with all out warfare if there was any resistance to their supposed right to "rule the galaxy".

With fifteen navy ships, ranging from frigates to a carrier and three Super MAC stations, High-Com had thought they would be able to beat the Imperials easily. But as they gleaned more information from scans and what they could learn from messages sent from the other ships, they realized that if they could defeat them, it would be at a terrible cost.

Mike shook himself and tried not to think about it. He couldn't afford to look nervous; he had a job to do.

The airlock hissed as pressure between the ship and the station was equalized. The doors parted to reveal ten people. At the front of the party there were three, a man as tall as a Spartan in the lead, along with a young woman and a short, stocky man who looked to be in his mid-fifties.

Behind them were seven men in heavy, black and red armour; each carrying a long rifle.

As they walked through the doorway it remained open. Mike began to wonder why, when he again felt slight tremors beneath his feet.

Four huge warriors, clad in the most imposing armour Mike and the others had ever seen, strode through after their counterparts. Each was one was over eight feet tall and held enormous rifles. They walked to the back of the group, but didn't stand at attention like the seven other bodyguards.

The Colonel looked completely unfazed.

"Sir," he said to the leader of the group. "Welcome to the Crown space station. I am Colonel Timothy Smith." There was no hesitation or change in his voice as he told that little lie. "We will escort you to the command centre to meet with Admiral Seer."

"Colonel, I am Inquisitor Macador. Please, lead on."

As the Colonel led them away, Mike looked back to the airlock doors. Just as they closed he caught a glimpse of another man, slightly shorter than the other large warriors and in lighter armour. His face was cast in shadow as he played with what looked like a large machete.

Great, Mike thought, _More mysterious people_.

* * *

><p>They reached the elevator terminal. Mike and X-ray stood back at attention until the doors opened and they were allowed access. The safety message played as they entered and the Inquisitor and his bodyguards payed a surprising amount of attention to it.<p>

They had little trouble strapping themselves in, only a few of the black and red clad men, storm troopers as the Inquisitor called them, had trouble.

The larger warriors Mike now knew as Space Marines, stood to one side of the elevator. No one asked if they needed to sit and they didn't say so, instead magnetizing there boots to the deck.

The elevator started to drop. It wouldn't take long for them to reach the surface, but they had enough time to talk.

Mike unbuckled himself as the safety light turned itself off and floated over to the others.

"What do you think?" he asked Isabel.

"I think I miss my gun. And I think that they have got some very cool toys." She motioned to the Space Marines and their high calibre weapons, a large grin on her face.

Mike smiled. In the entire Spartan program on Hope, Isabel was the youngest. Her dog-tags hung from a necklace of ork teeth, and like the orks she had pulled them from in her short career outside of X-ray, she had an obsession with machine-guns.

"I was looking for a serious answer."

"I think everything should be fine." She said.

"What do you guys think?"

Connor and Daniel looked at each other for a few moments before looking back at Mike and shrugging simultaneously.

"I agree with Isabel," Adel said. He was still strapped firmly into his seat, arms crossed and eyes closed. Mike had almost forgotten Adel hated zero-g environments.

* * *

><p>THE OTHERS floating to and from different points began to sit and strap back into their seats.<p>

Brother Anicetus watched as they squirmed and wriggled into their restraints. Anicetus was locked firmly to the floor, as were his

Battle-Brothers.

Hailing from the Sons of Antaeus, Anicetus stood over a head taller than his brethren. He had no doubts about how his size made others feel, and he also didn't care. He was a member of the Deathwatch and he would never use his size as a means to intimidate another true member of the Imperium.

These others though, he was not sure of. He surveyed the compartment as it finally reached the dock on the planet's surface. The architecture appeared odd to him. He continued to study their surroundings as they were led out through the building. Compared to the grand halls of an Imperial spaceport the design was extremely minimalist, with smooth curves to almost every corner and little decoration save for a few pictis and potted plants.

Whether that was through necessity or design Anicetus didn't like it. It reminded him too much of T'au constructions.

He was, however, surprised by its sturdiness. Even under his and his brothers' immense weight, the walkways and stairways didn't give at all.

As they walked they saw almost no one. There were some construction crews working to the other side of the lobby several stories down, but the only others they saw were the soldiers standing guard at the entrance to one room.

They snapped to attention as the group walked in, stiffening slightly as Anicetus and his three brothers passed them.

Anicetus strode into the security and reception area where the group stopped.

The armoured man who had addressed them earlier, Colonel Smith, turned to Macador.

"Sir Inquisitor, for security purposes I can only allow you to take three men with you to meet with the Admiral."

Anicetus stepped to the Inquisitor's side, but to his surprise was waved away.

"No need, Brother Anicetus. The Lieutenant can provide me with three of his men."

The Lieutenant called out three names and they stepped into the other room along with the Inquisitor and the others.

"I wonder why he did that."

Brother Auem of the Raven Guard stood next to him, as did his brothers Cain of the Blood Angels and Raze of the Salamanders.

"I don't think negotiations go well when there are three giants standing over you."

"Speak for yourself." Cain said, turning to the armoured men and woman at the opposite end of the room.

They each moved away to find a comfortable place to stand. If needed, they could use their coms to speak. Anicetus moved closer to where the storm troopers stood, half listening to their conversations as time passed.

"My lord?"

Anicetus looked up to see the storm trooper asking for him.

"Yes?"

"Sir, look over there, at what those men are standing around." The trooper motioned at the Spartans. They stood in a semi-circle around a hololith; on it was a person in a purple suit and hat.

"They're talking to someone, so what?"

"Not someone, my lord, some_thing_. I listened to them talk with it. It is artificial."

Anicetus balled his fists he realized the extent of the trooper's discovery.

"Abomination." Anicetus said aloud.

He took a step forward and reached for the grip of his boltgun.

That's when the first shots rang out.

* * *

><p>Mike, X-ray and the Major had been standing around the projector with Billy when they heard gunfire from outside.<p>

The Major ran for the com-panel next to the door.

"This is Major Linton B-170. Corporal, what's happening out there?"

"Orks!" the guard replied in a panic. "They're attacking the entrance. There must be hundreds of them!"

The Major slammed his palm into the panel to open the doors and ran outside, followed by Imperial and UNSC alike.

"Why didn't someone spot them before?" Mike asked the Corporal

"I don't know. But whoever was on watch needs to be fired. Half of them are painted purple!"

Mike looked for a way down; there wasn't time for stairs. He looked back to see that the Major had clearly had the same idea.

Vaulting over the railing he dropped four levels to the ground, shattering the tiled floor below. The Major unlocked his armour and got up, sprinting towards the entrance to help the soldiers already there.

Connor turned to Mike and then to the storm troopers and Space Marines. A wolfish grin splitting his face, he put on his helmet and vaulted over the railing as well. He was quickly followed by Isabel, who looked awkward while jumping in her GRENADIER armour, then Mike and Adel.

Mike had a less ceremonial landing than the Major, along with the rest of his team. As they ran for the entrance Mike turned at a sudden crashing sound behind him.

The largest of the four Space Marines had landed in a crouch and was now surrounded by destroyed tiles. His counterparts landed in a similar fashion behind him.

* * *

><p>ANICETUS CHARGED forwards out of his crouch. He caught up to the last Spartan with ease and they both ran to the entrance. By now the green-skins had almost reached the doors. The Spartans and other soldiers were keeping them at bay but they wouldn't for long.<p>

Gripping his bolter in his right hand, he drew his chainsword with his left. Anicetus jumped over the barricade and charged down the outside steps to meet the ork assault.

Too foolish to realize the threat he posed, two orks closed the distance swinging cleavers at Anicetus' head. He blocked the first then allowed the other to spark off of his armour. He then blew away the first ork with his bolter and beheaded the other one just as a group of five orks were engulfed by Razes' flamethrower.

To Anicetus' left more orks were cut down by Cain's powersword, and just as he began to wonder about his location, Auem sprang from the rooftop, his wrist-mounted bolter felling a large ork while his power claw tore into the smaller grots.

They continued their bloody march into the ork advance, but as their numbers fell their tactics improved

As he fought, Anicetus caught a glimpse of the red armoured Spartan, Major Linton B-170, fighting three orks with a captured axe and cleaver.

A break in his concentration, Anicetus lost his footing as a rudimentary explosive went off near him. The blast was powerful enough to knock him forwards down the steps and land him in the thick of an ork mob.

They attacked with sharp blades and blunt hammers. Anicetus blew two of them away and bisected a third, and then a fourth.

He couldn't kill them all.

As more orks surrounded him, the more he fought and the more he killed.

His bolter ran dry as he shot an ork Nob wielding a large axe. As he carved through dozens of them, his chainsword jammed, locked onto a fallen ork's metal armour.

Anicetus balled his fists. He would beat them to death if he had to.

The orks around him looked skywards. The sounds of gunfire and explosions were drowned out by the roar of jets as two fighter craft approached in the distance. As they neared their fans rotated to blast downwards letting them hover to one side of the battle. They opened up, spitting depleted uranium rounds into the orks closest to them.

One turned to face the mob surrounding Anicetus, tearing them to pieces. It stayed looking for other targets for a moment, then moved off to help its twin.

* * *

><p>Mike walked back up the stairs to the reception. X-ray had no fatalities, although a lot of them were wounded. As far as he knew the Space Marines had come out of it unharmed.<p>

As Mike entered the inner doors parted to reveal Admiral Seer, Inquisitor Macador and the others were unharmed.

The Inquisitor looked quite pleased as he and his troopers walked out of the room. Admiral Seer stood tall as he left, saluting Macador and his men. He did, however, look very pale.

A hand placed itself on Mikes shoulder.

"Gather your squad," the Major said. "There's something we need to tell you."

He walked away before Mike could reply.

* * *

><p>ANICETUS STOOD over the hololith, its projector was cracked slightly but he could tell it still worked.<p>

"Intelligence, are you there?"

The top of the hololith lit up with a purple glow as the figure reappeared. It was a woman. She stood in the same suit as before, wearing a top hat and leaning forwards onto a cane.

"Yes?" she asked.

He hesitated for a moment, not truly wanting to speak to it. "Those fighters, they were unmanned weren't they? They had no cockpits."

"That is correct."

"Then who was flying them?"

The woman tilted her head to the right slightly.

"Me."

5. Chapter 5

Chapter 4

"You have to admit, the Major was pretty amazing in that fight."

Sitting on the balcony, Mike turned to look Daniel in the face.

"If by amazing you mean foolhardy and completely idiotic," he said. "Then yes, he was pretty 'amazing'" Mike glared back over the cityscape, wondering how the Major had come out of that fight unscathed.

"Come on, Mike. It's not like he charged in immediately, he did take a lot down with his shotgun."

"Yes, but when he ran out of ammo he should have stayed at range and used his sidearm or any weapons he could find. He shouldn't have just run in and started copying those Space Marines." This time Adel spoke on Mike's behalf. It was rare for him to take sides in the team's arguments.

Mike felt a nudge in the shoulder from Isabel. Colonel Tim and Lieutenant Jodi were walking towards them following Admiral Seer. Each had a grave look on their face; and they clearly had bad news to tell.

* * *

><p>"And, in return for our cooperation in finding the aliens and our complete submission to their rule, the Imperium will aid us in the development of the colony and provide us their technology and safety from all manner of who-knows-what."<p>

The wind rustled through the balcony plants as they stood listening to the Admiral's words. None of them spoke. They only blinked and stared with blank faces as the gravity of the proposal sank in. The Admiral himself sat at a table, his eyes closed; massaging his brow with his palm.

"Sir, you can't be serious. We're not just going to sit here and let them take everything like this are we?" Daniel stepped forward. His voice pitched with his trademark Australian accent, something his parents had given him, and something the Spartan program had never seemed to shake.

Mike stayed leaning on the rail. His head was downcast in utter disbelief of the Imperial's self-professed power. How could they have possibly fought such an enemy? At first Mike had wanted to fight them, he wanted to win as all Spartans do. But he knew that they just couldn't.

"We haven't got a choice son. Maybe we'd send a few of those ships to hell, but they'd blow us to pieces afterward. We'll just have to help them" He looked at each member of team. "With the upgrades in tech the Imperials can offer us, we should stand a better chance against anything that even they're afraid of. But refitting all those ships and armour is going to take time, and the Inquisitor wants to get

started on the search for the Covenant now. So, we're going to send an advance force ahead of us with four of their ships, while two stay behind."

"And I suppose X-ray will be a part of that force?" Mike asked. The Admiral gave him a nod.

"We'll also be sending Billy. She will be going up with your suit technicians on a Marathon class cruiser."

"Sir," Mike said. "If you don't mind me asking, what is the ship called?"

"The _Solace of Death_â€|"

* * *

><p>WALKING TOWARDS one of the ship's hangar bays, Jeramiah watched as teams of men rushed past him, all of them trying to get ready for the arrival of the UNSC troops. Jeramiah had wanted for their arrival to go smoothly with a short by a ceremony held for a new regiment's first voyage, even if they were only new to the Imperium's traditions.<p>

The Inquisitor's terms were steep, but not as steep as they could have been. All the same Jeramiah wanted the UNSC men to feel welcome.

The _Solace of Death_, as they had called it, had a jump drive that was considered safer than an Imperial warp engine, but it was also far slower. They would need the ship to keep pace with the fleet, so they had decided to lock the _Solace_ to the _Canis Imperialis'_ _hull, giving it the extra speed and protecting the smaller ship with the _Canis'_ _shielding.

He walked onto the bay floor. Like the corridors behind him it was full of men, busy with sorting the latches and seals that would hold the UNSC ship to their hull. He looked on as a group of men erected a temporary holding area for equipment under the supervision of an officer.

A call came through the hangar loudspeakers.

"The ship will arrive in one hour."

Jeramiah began to walk back to the bridge. As he left, he passed four of the Deathwatch marines. He hardly ever saw the fifth, a surprisingly thin Astarte who only wore scout armour. Jeramiah had no doubts however that the warrior saw him. The other four nodded to Jeramiah as he walked by.

Jeramiah took one last look at the men in the hangar. For twenty years he had sailed on this ship. It had belonged to his father, an extremely wealthy man who had made his living taking charters from the Adeptus Mechanicus to explore new parts of space. When he died he left his wealth, house and honor with Jeramiah's sister. He had left Jeramiah only his ship, a near derelict old Explorator, a relic that ought to have been forgotten.

As he took command Jeramiah found that instead of meeting a crew

welcoming the son of an old friend, he met with a group of men who were hostile to him at first, only warming to him because he was competent enough to keep them alive and get them paid.

He wasn't sure why, but Jeramiah had always been given cold treatment by those he didn't know or hadn't met several times before.

Accept for Ark.

* * *

><p>THE SOLACE of Death slowly rotated, aligning itself with the _Canis'_ hull. The two ships latched onto each other, with the S_olace's_ port side hangar bay now opening out into the _Canis'_ _starboard hangar. The UNSC ship was smaller than the _Canis_, making their hangar smaller too. Mobile ramps, often used to load freight, manoeuvred into position to allow the occupants of both ships to move between them.

Jeramiah, the Inquisitor and General Hower, along with all of their staff, stood at the base of the largest of these ramps. Behind them stood over two thousand men, a mere fraction of the twenty-thousand odd troops the _Canis_ was carrying. All of the regiments aboard were represented, but most of them were Mercians. General Hower had been adamant that the Mercians should attend in larger numbers.

They had been greatly humiliated when the xenos attacked and destroyed one of their companies, and Hower thought it would be best if they were introduced to the ones who could help them take revenge.

Jeramiah looked behind him briefly. The man standing to the front of the Mercians was Hektor Pranovic, their Colonel.

He turned back to the ramp. The ship's band began to play a loud tune, "The Emperor's March". The noise was quite loud, even from where he stood, so he told them to tone it down a little. As the band played, UNSC men came to the edge of their hangar deck, standing at attention so perfectly it rivalled even the Imperial formation. They were in dress uniforms, some white, some blue and some green.

The first of the UNSC honor guard stood at the top of the ramp for a moment, a space left in the centre of their line. The ship's captain and two tall, muscled men walked up through the gap and led the honor guard down the shallow ramp, stopping where its base met with the ship. Their captain was quite possibly the tallest non Astarte Jeramiah had ever seen, dwarfing even the two men Jeramiah now realized were Spartans.

That wasn't what surprised Jeramiah and the others the most.

"Captain Fullhorn," their captain said. "Permission to come aboard."

"Permission granted, Captain Lightner." Jeramiah replied. Lightner stepped onto the hangar deck. She wore a white dress uniform, so Jeramiah assumed the other men in white must have been naval crew. The two of them exchanged salutes, though both were completely different. They shook hands and she introduced him to the shorter

Spartan, Colonel Smith. Jeramiah introduced them to General Hower, and then to Colonel Pranovic. He saw some suspicion on Pranovic's face as he shook the Spartan's hand, but he also knew that both men instantly had each-others respect and why. They were both covered in scars.

Inquisitor Macador had specifically asked to be introduced to them last. Lightner gave him a short curtsy. She had obviously been told of the Inquisitor's high, but non-military, position. He smiled and gave her a low bow before shaking her hand. He was clearly testing her.

Jeramiah and the others stepped aside so that the captain and her men on deck along with the rest of the _Solace of Death's_ men were in full view of the guardsmen and crew of the _Canis Imperialis_.

"Captain, Colonel, men and women of the UNSC," Jeramiah said, his voice amplified though the hangar speakers. "Welcome to the Imperial fleet!"

Both the Imperial and UNSC men started to cheer as the band started to play once again. The UNSC seemed a little more enthusiastic. They hadn't seen new faces in a long time.

And, Jeramiah remembered, they hadn't been told the Inquisitor's demands.

6. Chapter 6

Chapter 5

They were headed for the planet of Antillia. It was the fourth planet in the Covenant ship's projected flight plan. The small ship had been spotted on several occasions, and always in the same way. A guard or civilian outpost would send out a distress call to any Imperial ships in orbit, communications would be lost and reinforcements would arrive to realize they had missed the whole show, with the small ship then being detected jumping out of the system.

From the few who had survived these attacks came stories of senseless monsters; small apelike beings with shells of tough chitin, bird-lizards wielding rifles that made a man explode and tall, immensely muscled warriors with shaggy fur who not only killed but also ate their victims. Some of the stories also detailed attacks from huge metal clad snakes blowing apart transports that tried to flee.

Already on edge from pirate raids, Antillia would have to be ready before the Imperial fleet arrived. And that was in six weeks.

* * *

><p>The UNSC and Imperial men were mixing quite well, though there had been some disputes. Many of these had been related to faith, with the UNSC men believing in separate religions and the Imperial men having a single unified one they often clung to over zealously. Surprisingly one of the largest, and one of the most trivial, started when some of the Canis' crew noticed the marathon symbol

emblazoned on the side of the _Solace_ and on her crew's uniforms. As Mike had come to understand, the emblem was similar to one used by an alien species.

X-ray jogged down the halls of the _Canis_. They had special permission to go on exercise runs through the larger ship to keep them in shape and to make them more familiar with it. There was often a group of guardsmen and marines who would run with them, though they usually only ran half the circuit.

On this particular run an imperial man, a training sergeant by the looks of him, was running the course with them, forcing the guardsmen to keep pace. The marines continued on where they would normally turn back, making the whole run a competition.

The sergeant kept on shouting to his men to run faster, but many stayed at one speed. Mike, at the front, ran up the corridor and rounded a corner. The others followed and stopped behind him. Mike had run right back into the hangar bay they had started in only an hour ago.

"What the hell," he said aloud. Mike was totally confused.

The sergeant stood next to him. "Don't worry about it sir," the man told him. "Warp travel tends to screw with your sense of time and direction." He turned to his guardsmen and the marines. "Guardsmen, get to our training rooms! Marines, I imagine your commanders would want you to do the same."

There was a resounding "Sir, yes, sir!" and the men broke up and moved away. Many passed by with only a few glances from some of the greener guardsmen, but a few of them gave the Spartans a few odd looks and sideways glances.

Mike told X-ray to follow the marines back to the exercise room. He was going to go for a walk.

He couldn't understand it. Why had he gotten so lost on a course he'd run many times before? He decided to just run with what the sergeant had said, _Warp travel tends to screw with your sense of time and direction._

Most of the hatches and doorways on the level he was on were closed, so Mike moved on towards an elevator. He was astounded at the number of decks; six hundred and thirty-three. It would have taken days just to inspect them all fully and it gave him a whole new level of respect for the men and women who tried to maintain the colossal ship.

He was on one of the mid-decks, so he decided to go a few levels lower. He took a quick look at the button panel and for the second time that day he was confused. The lowest fifty buttons had been removed and adhesive tape had been stuck over the holes. He was just wondering why when another man joined him in the cart.

Mike asked him about it.

"Oh, you mean decks five-eighty-three to six-thirty-three? Oh, we don't go to those decks, friend. There be nasty things down there."

The cart came to a stop at his level.

He got off and started jogging down the corridor, making mental notes of signs and way markers. He had learned on the teams runs that the entire ship suffered from a major heating problem, and it was quite apparent in the corridor. Frost and condensation coated the walls and bulkheads, even the lights couldn't stave off the cold with their glow.

He heard noises and shouting from inside a hatch he had passed. He backpedaled and peered in. A large crowd of men surrounded a lowered floor. Two men stood on the floor at the centre of the crowd, fists up and ready. It was a fight club. One of the men was a bald ODST, Mike could tell because of the tattoo on his shoulder. The other was imperial; he had blond hair and odd violet eyes, and a tattoo of his own; a skull sitting inside what looked like a basic Greek temple.

They were obviously close to the end of their bout. They were both in bad shaped, but the ODST looked to be worse off. The other man moved closer and delivered one final blow to the ODST's jaw and the trooper went down. The other man helped him to his feet and they both walked off to a medic enjoying the show from a far bench.

"Ladies and little girls," said a robed man stepping into the ring. He received some laughter from the men present. "I think we should give a grand round of applause for the last two competitors. But now it is time for some of the grandest of all competitors to enter the ring, in our _Grand _finale for this evening." He smiled as the wound the crowd up. He was a real silver-tongue, despite of his overuse of the word grand.

"I give you Antoine, Markass and Greas; the three best fighters to ever grace this fine establishment."

The three men walked onto the floor and stood next to the announcer. They were all from the same detachment as the last imperial man but they looked much stronger than him and far more intimidating.

"The rules for this bout are simple; one versus all the men you see here in the ring, all fighting styles welcome. You have the choice of fighting them one at a time, but that only gets you half the prize," he let the crowd whisper amongst themselves for a moment before continuing. "If you choose to fight them all at once, you win everything."

He peered around the room. "Any takers?" he asked.

The others in the room looked around at each other. They all wanted the money, but none of them wanted the risk. The announcer started to sound a little impatient. All for show, of course.

"Come on, ladies. Is there really no one here who dares fight these men?" some of the men looked away, others actually shook their heads. He continued to look around the room. "What about you young man?"

Every eye turned to look at Mike. He looked behind him to see if they were looking at someone else. They weren't.

"Sorry, can't." It felt awkward standing there, so he turned to leave.

"What's wrong? Too much of a pussy?" shouted one of the competitors. Mike stopped in his tracks and turned around. He walked right up the man and stared into his eyes. He didn't even have to say anything.

They backed off into their corners. The other two were about to leave the ring when Mike called them back. All three of them looked at him and got into brawlers stances. Perfect, Mike thought.

The announcer sounded a bell and almost immediately one of the men charged at him. Mike waited for him to get close then as he tried to deliver a left hook, Mike stepped to his left and put his elbow in the guardsman's face. The man's momentum carried him into the attack and it sent him sprawling into the mat behind Mike.

The second guardsman moved in slower than the first. He closed the range with the third man close behind him and kicked at Mike's side. Mike let it connect and moved with the blow, then pinned the leg to his side with his own arm. Unable to attack the second man called out to the third and he sent a punch strait for Mike's face. He let it pass to the left, then grabbed the arm and twisted.

He twisted the leg of the second man around and let him drop to the floor screaming in pain. The first man was unconscious, the second couldn't walk and the third he dispatched with one more hit to the chest.

The other men in the room stared in awe. Mike had just beaten three of the club's best without injury. He walked over to the announcer.

"Well?" he asked.

The hunched man peered back at him from under his hood. "Well what?"

"Where is my money, that's what." He replied with a frown.

"Oh, you think you've won do you?" the man said as he walked slowly towards Mike. "You obviously weren't listening to the rules then."

Mike's frown deepened. "I've taken out the others!"

The hunchback continued towards him. "You took down the other three, aye, but I didn't say ye had to fight those three, did I?" the man's voice had completely changed.

"I said ye had to fight all the people in the ring, didn't I?" He stood up straight and Mike realized he wasn't a hunchback at all.

The next thing he knew, Mike was on the ground, his nose bleeding and a huge boot planted firmly on his chest. The hooded figure stared down at him, a manic grin on his face. He tore off his cloak to reveal thick, black body armour with a silver left pauldron and a

grey-blue right one over bone coloured coveralls.

The giant leant down and looked directly into Mike's face. He had the teeth of a wolf.

"You lose." He said.

He took his boot off Mike's chest and let him leave.

Mike stood back in the corridor as the others filed out. He walked back to the elevator and went back up to the other level.

His earpiece started buzzing.

"Mike! Are you there? We have a problem! Over."

* * *

><p>THE ELEVATOR moved swiftly from the bridge towards the hangar. Ark stood idle next to the control panel and another navy officer. The UNSC captain stood next to him. They had been talking to Jeramiah about different matters for most of the afternoon cycle and they were headed back to the Solace.

Ark gave the tall captain a glance. She seemed to be occupied with looking at the floor selection, a puzzled look on her face.

"Ma'am, is there something wrong?"

"No," she replied. "I just noticed that this elevator can move to the lower levels when the others can't. Why is that?"

Ark tried to explain as best she could. "Well, this elevator moves through the best defended parts of the ship, so it is used as the main access way to the bridge."

"What about these decks?" the captain asked her. "Why can they only be accessed from here?"

"The bottom fifty decks are filled with radiation from the ship's engines. That's way there are rad-suits in that container there."

Ark turned away and leaned up against the wall. She was too tired to talk. She was just starting to daydream when she was jolted back to reality by the crewman's elbow in her side. Glaring at him she asked him what was wrong.

"Th-the elevator," he said. "I-it just went past our floor."

She looked at the deck indicator. It was increasing. They were dropping rapidly.

Ark scrambled to the emergency brake and pulled it hard. The brakes screeched as they bit into the rails. Then they failed, dropping the cart nearly a hundred and fifty decks before they caught again. They plummeted at many kilometres an hour before the brakes slowed them down enough for it to be safe.

They were still dropping.

The cart crashed into the bottom of the ship, sending them all to the floor.

Ark managed to stand as an automated voice chimed over the vox system.

+Welcome to deck six-hundred and thirty-three. Please ensure that you are wearing your hazard-suit and body armour +

+and that your weapons are fully loaded. +

7. Chapter 7

Chapter 6

Mike skidded to a halt outside X-ray's armory. The others were only just arriving before him.

"What's the situation?"

"Fucked, that's what it is!" Daniel yelled over his shoulder as they jogged to their suits. "Jesus, you should have heard what that Fullhorn guy was going on about when he called us in the hangar. He says Captain Lightner and two of his own senior officers were in an elevator when its brakes failed. Sent them falling straight to the bottom of the ship. If they're still alive then they've been down there for almost two hours."

"Two hours?" Mike asked. "Haven't they sent their own team in?"

"They did," Billy told him, appearing on a holographic display at the centre of the room. "Two in fact. One went down the shaft seventy minutes ago, the other one is heading down now."

"Why would they send two teams in?"

Mike stepped up to his MJOLNIR armour and turned to let the tech crew do their job.

The AI turned her projected face towards him. "They lost contact with the first group after they hit the bottom of the ship. Now, they officially stated to us that the first team had only lost radio contact. But as you all know," she said, looking smugly into the distance. "I'm not one for 'official statements'. I did some digging through their com network, not the easiest thing to do but doable none the less, and it turns out the team didn't just get washed out by radiation."

She played the transcript of the first team's mission log. In Mike's opinion, it was one of the most awful things he'd ever heard.

+ [Capt. Fullhorn] Sergeant?

[Sergeant Drovdis] We hear you, sir. We haven't found Lieutenants Fisk and Traviss or Captain Lightner yet. It does look like the emergency hazard suits are gone though.

[Capt. Fullhorn] Confirmed, move ahead and find them.

[Sergt. Drovttis] Alright men stay tight. You know this place is off limits and you know why. I want Krobec and Salles to take point for their squads. Move parallel to each other down those corridors. Go, go!

[/FFWËfËf20Minutes/]

[Sergt. Drovttis] What have you found, Guardsman?

[Guardsman Ieko] Looks like one of the rad-suits, sir. It's had the shit torn out of it, but there isn't any blood. I'd say our missing guys musta used it as a distraction for something.

[Sergt. Drovttis] Hmm. Second squad, what have you found, over?

[Unknown Guardsman; Second Squad] Errâ€|

[Sergt. Drovttis] Second Squad?

[Unknown Guardsman; Second Squad] Well, there's blood over here, sir. And bullet casings. Lots of 'em. From the looks of it they were firing back down the corridor in the direction of the elevator.

[Sergt. Drovttis] That's bad. It means they're getting hounded like lobotomized grox down here. Okay, second. Keep moving forward. If you don't find anything then we'll meet you at junctionâ€|86-D. Copy?

[Unknown Guardsman; Second Squad] Copy, sir. 86-D. over and out.

[/FFWËfËf15Minutes/]

[Sergt. Drovttis] All right, men. 86-D. Hold up, Salles, we'll wait for second squad to get here.

[Unknown Guardsman; Second Squad] Serg-â€|-vis-â€|-eant Dro-â€|

[Sergt. Drovttis] Second? Second, you're breaking up! Where in the Emperor's name are you?

[Unknown Guardsman; Second Squad] Corridor T-sixte-â€|-bout half a click from your current-â€|-God Emperor, they're just-â€|-tearing-â€|-ease hel-â€|

[Sergt. Drovttis] Throne. Salles take Ieko with you and find out what the hell those idiots are doing.

[Guardsman Salles] But, sir-

[Sergt. Drovttis] Damn it, trooper, I gave you an order!

[Guardsman Salles] Sarg! _Listen_! (Distant screeching; unknown origin)

[Sergt. Drovttis] What the hell?

[Guardzman Prokovo] Whoa! Motion spike on my tracker! Throne, it's coming from corridor T-16!

[Sergt. Drovttis] Is it second squad?

[Guardzman Prokovo] Negative, it's too large.

[Sergt. Drovttis] Form up! At least two men covering each corridor at all-(Rending of metal; Sub human screeching) Shit! (Las-fire) Salles! Get that fucker off of Prokovo! (Terrified screams) Ieko? Ieko, calm down, Emperor damn your corpse! Ieko-...+

Mike's armorers stepped away from him. Their usual pre-mission banter had died away minutes ago and their faces were grim. Mike wished there had at least been some video to show what they were up against.

He put his helmet on and walked to the centre of the room.

The others assembled around him. A look, not of dread but determination framed each of their faces. They put on their helmets, and marched out of the room.

* * *

><p>THERE WAS barely enough room. Raze, Auem and Cain stood behind Anicetus in the cramped space of one corridor leading away from the elevator. They had waited nearly twenty minutes for the Spartans to arrive. The first was just detaching from his ascension cable; the blue armoured team leader, Mike.<p>

The soldier made no salute, he simply walked over to Anicetus as his team repelled in behind him.

"Brother Anicetus," the man said.

"Brother-Sergeant Anicetus," Cain corrected him in a menacing tone.

Anicetus told him to calm down through their com-beads. He turned back to the Spartan. "Do not worry yourself, I care not. Now, as for our mission. I believe that we should move in separate groups with one Spartan and one of my own brothers in each."

"I don't think that's wise," Mike replied. "There will be communication problems and our tactics are too different."

"Yes, but since our tactics are different, when our enemies attack one member of a group then they won't be able to predict the movements of the second." Anicetus tried to say this as reassuringly as possible, but was unable to gauge the Spartan's response through his visored helm. The smaller warrior did ask, however, what they would be fighting.

"Hullghast," Raze answered him. "The children of former crew and stowaways mutated into little more than beasts by the radiation."

"All right then," the Spartan said. Anicetus watched him move back to his squad to give them orders. He turned to his own brothers to do the same.

"Brother Raze, you shall go with their weapons specialist. You don't have your flamethrower, but you can help direct her fire. Auem, go with their scout and move ahead of us to pick up the trail. I shall move with their team leader. Cain shall have to go with the other two Spartans." They gave their acknowledgments. Anicetus went to confirm the choices with Mike. They had had similar ideas.

"Brothers, move out."

* * *

><p>Adel wasn't angry. He hardly ever was.<p>

Many people thought Adel was one of the silent brooding types. He saw himself more as the 'strong but silent' type; he didn't say much, but that was because he often thought there wasn't a need to. The space marine Mike had told him to go with howeverâ€|

Adel wasn't angry, but he was downright annoyed.

Adel appreciated his skill and observational abilities, but the man would not stop talking.

"Hmm," he started up again. "These tracks here in the grime suggest they went along in this direction. It looks like they continue onwards for quite some time up the same corridor. Hello, what's this?"

Adel watched as the giant bent down to pick up a tattered piece of yellow material stuffed between an old crate and a bulkhead. Auem, as he was called, studied it for some time before putting it back. Adel opened a secure line to Mike.

"Mike, we just reached point alpha, object of interest found."

"Affirmative, Adel. Don't move it, take a look and keep going till you reach point beta. Out."

Adel clicked his radio off and followed behind Auem.

"What were you doing back there?" the giant asked.

"Nothing," Adel replied. "Just calling it in."

* * *

><p>Gun tracking from left to right, Isabel stalked down the corridor with her space marine counterpart not far behind. The place was giving her the creeps.<p>

Gothic and dark by its original design, the access ways and corridors were made even more grim and menacing by the bursts of steam from old and broken pipes, the flickering of emergency lights and the constant damp that covered every wall. Every vent and duct and door had the potential to hide an enemy, and memories of the transcript weren't

helping.

At least she had her gun and Raze there to help. She had seen him fight during the battle of the space port back on Hope and she had been impressed by his ability to remain perfectly calm and on task, moving slowly but surely to wipe out the orks.

She stopped. A noise was coming from a junction up ahead. Raze moved to her side, his bolter up.

"Trouble?" he asked.

"You bet your life," Isabel whispered. With her night vision she could see the creature. Like Raze had said earlier it was once human, but it had since degraded into an animal. Its skin was leathery and pulled taught with horns erupting at odd places across its body and great talons replaced what were once fingernails. Raze made to shoot the creature, but Isabel held his bolter down. "Don't want more of them to show up."

She thought for a moment. "Hold my gun," she said, thrusting the weapon into Razes grasp. Drawing her combat knife, she flipped it in the air and caught it again by the blade. She drew her arm back and cast the knife through the air, embedding it into the hullghast's temple and sending the beast crashing into the deck.

Isabel moved over to retrieve her knife. Raze followed and handed her back her machine gun.

"A fine throw."

"Thank you. Now I guess we'd better go, there could be more--"

Isabel was smashed to her right, into a bulkhead. A second hullghast had snuck up from behind and now stared down at her prone form. It raised its clawed hand to strike at her helmet but stopped as it noticed Raze moving slowly towards it. The hullghast took a swipe at his chest plate which he shrugged off and continued on. Catching a second swipe at his head, Raze calmly clasped his free hand around the creature's mouth and face. Unable to call for help the hullghast died flailing its arms as Raze crushed its skull with little effort.

With a single bloodied gauntlet, Raze picked up Isabel's machine gun by the barrel casing and used it to help her up before giving it back.

All she could say was. "Thanks."

* * *

><p>CAIN WAS angry. He usually was.<p>

He had thought that Auem's ceaseless ramblings were rage inducing, but these two Spartans made up a whole new meaning for the word. They constantly squabbled between each other, their arguments not only tiresome but also extremely trivial. The taste of the food on their ship, which of them was better at sports. The only one of their arguments Cain thought was worth listening to concerned which of them had the higher kill count, but even this he found unbearable after it

began to drag on.

Listening to them both did reveal much about their characters however.

He had discovered that one, named Daniel, was a whiney, annoying and cocky fool. It came as no surprise when he was told Daniel was a pilot.

He had also discovered that the other was a risk taking, talkative, warmongering, near-insane idiot named Connor. Worryingly, Cain had also learned that he was a demolitions expert.

Cain followed the two of them through a large archway. He had not expected what was on the other side.

The archway opened out onto the floor of a large room with crates of ammunition and old equipment scattered around the entire space. At the centre of the room was an enormous blast door leading down into a disused airlock.

The two Spartans moved out, inspecting each crate. Cain walked to the one nearest to him and brushed the dust from its side. The stenciled letters underneath the dust read 'Lasgun Standard Ammunition Cartridges'. He moved to the next crate and did the same, only this time a grin flickered across his usually stern face. The crate read 'Handle with Care: Hellfire Bolt Rounds'.

* * *

><p>"Confirmed, Brother Cain, stay in contact with us."<p>

Mike was barley listening. They had been searching the lower decks for an hour and the only hope they had of finding Captain Lightner and the others were the broken trails they found in every other corridor.

Mike did have to hand it to Adel and Auem. They had kept each group heading in the right direction this entire time and hadn't lost the real trail once.

"That was Cain," Anicetus said to him. "They have found a weapons cache. If we lose the ability to get back to the elevator we can use it to resupply and fight through."

"Good."

Anicetus stopped.

"What's wrong?" Mike asked.

"Nothing," the giant replied as he started walking again. "You just seem quite distracted. We should only be focused on finding our men."

Mike followed him. But there was one question he just had to ask. "Anicetus, do you have any other space marines in your unit?"

"Hmm? Well, yes there is one other in fact," Mike cocked his head to one side, motioning for Anicetus to continue. "His name is Sigvald,

of the Space Wolves. A silver-tongued young man he is. Quite a rarity for a Wolf scout to be so young. The only Space Wolf I've ever known to shave and one of the few Deathwatch marines who operate in scout armour. You've met him, haven't you?"

"Just before we came down here," Mike replied. "He cheated me out of the prize money for a fight."

"Aye, he'll do that. He often sets up fight clubs to 'weed out all the dissidents on a ship'." Anicetus laughed. Mike could tell the Wolf scout had other motives.

They continued on down the corridor.

End
file.